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UNSPENT FUNDS HAVE CURTAILED THE CITY'S AIDS SERVICES

Money for Nothing

BY MARK SCHOOFS

Despite all the optimism about the end of AIDS, the disease still kills. Prevention remains the best medicine. But the city's Department of Health has failed to spend large chunks of its federal HIV prevention money, allowing the epidemic to spread faster than it

funds" were awarded midyear, the city's slow contracting process practically guaranteed that much of the money would need to be rolled over.

But a look at other cities that receive the same CDC prevention funds undermines these explanations.

• Of the six cities the CDC funds, only one



REBECCA SHAVULSKY

Ravinia Hayes-Cozier, director of the city's Bureau of HIV Program Services

otherwise would have.

In both 1993 and 1994, the city did not spend almost one-fifth of the money it received, letting more than \$2.2 million each year sit idle. And last year, more than \$4.8 million—about one-third of the total grant—went unused.

Fortunately, the Centers for Disease Control, which awards the money, has allowed the city to roll over the unspent funds. But that hasn't mollified AIDS advocates, many of whom have been struggling on shoestring budgets against an epidemic which is spreading most rapidly among New York's most needy citizens.

"My God, with the levels of poverty in the South Bronx and Brooklyn, that money could really have helped," says Jeff Haskins, executive director of People of Color in Crisis, a Brooklyn AIDS agency. His organization recently submitted a proposal for an adolescent peer-education project. It was rejected by the city. "And if they had the money but didn't apply it," Haskins says, "what can you say but incompetence?"

Indeed, some people think the unspent funds point to larger problems. Michael Isbell, associate director of Gay Men's Health Crisis, says it "raises questions" about whether the Bureau of HIV Program Services, which oversees the city's AIDS prevention efforts, is "effectively managed."

We do need to do a better job," concedes the bureau's director, Ravinia Hayes-Cozier. But she insists her office is hamstrung by the health department's famously sluggish contracting procedures, which consume at least six months. Also, snafus often keep money from being used. For example, if an employee leaves a program, his or her salary will go unspent until a replacement is hired.

Finally, says Hayes-Cozier, the bureau has been a victim of its own success. In 1995, the bureau won a competitive grant for an extra \$3.1 million. Because these "supplemental

(Houston) had a worse record of spending its money on time.

• Taken together, the other cities failed to spend 13 per cent of their last three annual grants; New York's unspent funds averaged 23 per cent.

• City size is not an excuse: Los Angeles, the CDC's second-largest grantee, was the most efficient, failing to spend just 4 per cent of its money.

Even the midyear supplemental award was handled better elsewhere. "It caused chaos," admits a high-ranking health official in another state. But this official, who asked that his name not be used, says his department shifted into overdrive: Directors of community organizations were called—during their vacations, in some cases—and told to submit grant applications within two weeks. The result? "We got the money out in record time." Hearing of New York's figures, the official snapped, "My head would be on a pike if that much money was unspent."

In a statement faxed to the Voice, Health Commissioner Margaret Hamburg said she was "deeply concerned," adding that her department "intends to aggressively seek ways to successfully adapt" the strategies of other cities to New York.

In fact, the city has proven capable of administering federal AIDS funds. The \$100 million Ryan White grant, earmarked for care of people with HIV, far exceeds the CDC prevention funds. But the city has managed this money much more efficiently, turning back just 7 per cent in 1994, and a mere 3 per cent last year.

The main reason is that the health department assigns the management of Ryan White funds to a private firm, bypassing the city's contracting morass. "If one part of the health department can do that," asks Keith Cylar, a direc-

tor of the AIDS agency Housing Works, "why can't another?"

Hayes-Cozier says she tried to implement that strategy this year, but City Hall nixed it. In order to get the system up as fast as possible, Hayes-Cozier couched it as a demonstration project. Noting that it was not a new idea, the mayor's office sent her back to the drawing boards. As Hayes-Cozier reworks that proposal, she says she has taken a pointer from how the Ryan White funds are supervised. Community agencies that receive prevention funds have been required to give a full accounting only at the end of each fiscal year. This meant the health department couldn't correct problems in mid-stream. New contracts will enable the bureau to reassign funds that aren't being put to use by midyear.

This will help, but it's hard to know how much. The health department denied a request by the *Voice* for an accounting of why money went unspent, maintaining that it would be too difficult to prepare by deadline. And Hayes-Cozier says she doesn't know what proportion of funds went unspent because of problems at community agencies, the health department's own slow contracting procedures, or other causes.

I feel like a feminist with rape fantasies, because I keep having fantasies about privatization," says one bureau employee, who requested anonymity. This source, and a handful of others—all of whom would only speak anonymously—insisted that the underspending was merely the most salient example of widespread mismanagement. "It boggles the mind," continued the bureau employee, "the stupidity, the inertia, the indifference."

Hayes-Cozier bristles at these charges, and it is difficult to assess their merits. The bureau has not been audited in at least several years, and the health department restricted interviews for this story. But critics point to the glacial pace of

the bureau's own initiatives. A media campaign targeting adolescents has been under development for two years—"too long," admits health department spokesperson Fred Winters. But Winters says the delay was partly because the ad agency quit in the middle of the project. (The ads will be ready early next year.)

Another media campaign, this one for black and Latino gay men, was proposed at least 15 months ago. Hayes-Cozier says she put it on hold partly because she wanted to enlist the involvement of key minority AIDS agencies. She also claims she could not redirect federal funds to the ad in the middle of the fiscal year—a point the CDC denies. Some of the new rollover money is now earmarked for this project.

Whatever the extent of the bureau's mismanagement, some pin the blame on Hayes-Cozier. Others point out that the underspending predates her; she has held her post for only two years. And Hayes-Cozier has won support for advancing the needs of people of color. "Ravonia is very sensitive to the African American community," says Linda Campbell, executive director of the Minority Task Force on AIDS. While "concerned" about the underspending, Campbell has her eyes on a different prize: "We've never had the dollars targeted to our community in a way the epidemic demanded. No matter how the spending problem is fixed, I want to see the money going to the communities hardest hit by the epidemic. That's the bear I go hunting after."

One city official, speaking privately, thinks mismanagement is precisely what is keeping AIDS money from reaching those who most need it. "Someone should have known [Hayes-Cozier] wasn't spending the money, and then given her what she needed, or gotten another person."

E-mail: schoofs@echonyc.com

Research assistance: TRACY SYERS

How Does New York Rate?

The Centers for Disease Control provides prevention HIV grants to six cities (as well as to every state). Here's a ranking of how efficiently the cities spent their money.

YEAR	TOTAL AWARD	TOTAL UNSPENT	% UNSPENT
LOS ANGELES			
1995	\$10,290,947	\$207,839	2
1994	\$ 8,146,888	\$400,015	5
1993	\$ 6,975,765	\$278,202	4
			Average 4
CHICAGO			
1995	\$3,965,846	\$286,983	8
1994	\$2,907,237	\$155,557	7
1993	\$2,789,869	\$85,126	4
			Average 6
SAN FRANCISCO			
1995	\$7,477,101	\$680,512	9
1994	\$5,884,049	\$596,757	10
1993	\$5,386,987	\$1,119,823	20
			Average 13
PHILADELPHIA			
1995	\$4,562,199	\$310,990	7
1994	\$3,783,952	\$742,212	18
1993	\$3,559,622	\$585,289	17
			Average 14
NEW YORK			
1995	\$15,294,838	\$4,814,632	31
1994	\$12,217,496	\$2,362,225	19
1993	\$11,452,483	\$2,222,828	19
			Average 23
HOUSTON			
1995	\$3,952,633	\$1,102,267	31
1994	\$3,458,840	\$1,189,665	35
1993	\$3,353,888	\$ 670,833	21
			Average 29



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